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ABSTRACT

The role of the public health nurse as part of the multidisciplinary team serving the handicapped child is discussed. Seven components of the special education process in which public health nurses are sharing a role are outlined: early identification and assessment of disabilities, health appraisals, referrals, interpretation of the handicap to school personnel, participation on placement committees, involvement in writing the individual education program, and provision of inservice training for teachers. It is concluded that concurrent with passage of P.L. 94-142 (the Education for All Handicapped Children Act), the role of the public health nurse in relation to the handicapped child has expanded from one of "caring for" the child to assisting in facilitating his learning. (SEH)

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THE PUBLIC HEALTH NURSE AS A HEALTH PROFESSIONAL IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS

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THE PUBLIC HEALTH NURSE AS A HEALTH PROFESSIONAL IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS

By

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Public Health Nurses have been involved in the education process in varying degrees for many years. In 1902 Lillian Wald who was both a nurse and a social worker was able to convince the New York City Health Department of the value of health services for the school child, particularly at that time to give first aid and to implement the control of communicable diseases. The immediate success of that program was recognized and other communities soon adopted a school health program.[1] The roles and functions of the public health nurse in relation to school health have greatly expanded since those early beginnings.

There have been wide variations in the role conceptions both among nurses themselves and among other professionals with whom the nurse works in relation to the most appropriate use of nursing expertise in the school. Hopefully, few individuals continue to stereotype the nurse as the Bandaider, the Taker of Temperatures, or the Maintainer of Immunization Records. Today the public health nurse is a professional practitioner in a specialized field in which technical nursing, interpersonal, analytical and organizational skills are applied to health as they affect the community.[2] The public health nurse views the child in his family and community context and is prepared to serve as a liason in health related matters between the school and family, school and community, child and parent, and on occasion, child and teacher.

While some states, particularly in urban communities, now employ full

time specialized school nurses, the school health program in many areas continues to be a responsibility of the local health department. Even in those areas which have full time school nurses, the public health nurse shares in the interpretation and coordination of services for school children with health related problems.

The involvement of the public health nurse in the special education process is not a new concept. For many years nurses have identified and interpreted special needs of handicapped children to the school system and assisted in adapting educational programs to meet these needs. In the past, the nurse has often been a crusader, an advocate who has often discovered that there were no appropriate shcool programs to meet the special educational needs of some of her patients. With the enactment of the Federal Education for all Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142), each state is now required to provide free, appropriate public education to handicapped children. This law has defined a "handicapped child" and mandates special education and related services designed to meet the unique needs of that child. Since the enactment of this legislation, public health nurses are gradually becoming recognized members of multidisciplinary teams whose mutual purpose is to aid children in developing full potential in health and education.

The role of the public health nurse in the <u>care</u> of the handicapped child is clearly defined and generally understood. I would like to address the role of the public health nurse in the <u>education</u> of the handicapped child. An essential factor in a child's education process is his physical, mental and social well being. A handicapped child has unique medical, psychological, social, recreational and vocational problems which must be dealt with if he is to

receive maximum benefits from his educational program.

A multidisciplinary team approach in exploring these often complex needs is the most effective method in developing and analyzing programs to facilitate the handicapped child's learning. The preparation and practical experiences of a skilled public health nurse enable her to contribute significantly as a health professional in this special education process.

A school does not exist in a social vacuum but is intimately and intricately associated with the family and community. The public health nurse is skilled in family dynamics and is familiar with the total situation in which the student must grow and develop. She understands the impact of any physical, emotional, or social problem upon the family unit. She is, hopefully, known and trusted by the family and often able to motivate the family to accept community resources. She may be able to strenghthen a family's confidence in and ability to accept the school programs and to encourage them to become more involved members of the school "team". Because of her close contacts with the family and community she may be able to suggest to the school system realistic methods of intervention.

A major aspect of the public health nurse's responsibility when working with families is to make proper referrals to other community resources. With her knowledge of these community resources she is prepared to assist the school in finding appropriate services and extracurricular activities for the handicapped child.

The ability to coordinate patient care is another important and vital attribute of the public health nurse. She is accustomed to serving on

interdisciplinary teams who are working toward common health related goals. She understands that effective team participation requires sharing information in a non-competetive fashion. She recognizes that services must be coordinated and integrated so as to avoid duplication and overlapping. Nursing skills can readily be adapted in assisting with the development of IEPs (individual education programs) since the nursing process and the special education process both utilize problem solving methods in a goal oriented approach. This ongoing process involves assessment of the situation, planning appropriate intervention, implementation of the plan, evaluation of the effectiveness and then reassessment.

The scope of the public health nurse's involvement in the special education process varies from locality to locality. This variability may be attributed to numerous factors including the flexibility, self confidence, and initiative of the nurse herself, or to the school division's acceptance of the nurse as a competent participant in the educational realm.

Let us briefly examine some components of the special education process in which public health nurses are sharing a role:

(1) Early Identification and Assessment of Disabilities

The public health nurse may have intimate contact with children long before the school system. On home visits, in well baby clinics, pediatric clinics, preschool screening clinics, speciality clinics, such as those sponsored by the Bureau of Crippled Children and Child Development Clinics, the public health nurse utilized her skills of normal growth and development to determine lags and abnormalities. Children with problems requiring follow-up are referred to appropriate agencies and also identified to the school system.

(2) Health Appraisals

Public health nurses continue to participate in screening procedures such as vision and hearing, and in physical inspections for deficiencies. Some localities have cooperative agreements whereby school related clinics are operated by the health department to help the school system meet some of the medical requirements prior to placing a child in a special education program.

(3) Referrals

The public health nurse is actively involved in the referral process for medical diagnostic and evaluation purposes and other community resources that could assist the child and/or his family. She may also offer assistance in coordinating services for the child. Often the nurse helps to determine the appropriateness of referring the child to social services departments or to the Social Security Administration for disability determination and advises the family of how to obtain these services.

(4) Interprets the Handicap to School Personnel

The public health nurses in local health departments and specialty clinics supervise the medical care of many handicapped children and are able to interpret recommendations relevant to the school program. She can help the school personnel understand the behavior they may expect as well as that which might be considered symptomatic of problems needing attention.

(5) May Serve on Placement Committees

In some schools the public health nurse is actively involved in placement decisions. In other schools the nurse is invited to participate if she works with the child in the community.

(6) May Participate in Writing the IEP - sometimes at the request of the school, sometimes at the request of the family.

(7) Inservice for Teachers

This is one area which needs more emphasis. More effort needs to be made in helping teachers feel comfortable with the child with a handicapping condition. By providing accurate information about the management of the child's health problem, the nurse can clarify misconceptions and fears related to inadequate knowledge about health problems.

In summary, the challenges inherent in P.L. 94-142 have forced disciplines to work together to provide the many services needed by handicapped children if they are to receive a free, appropriate education guaranteed them by this legislation. A well integrated and coordinated multi-disciplinary approach is definitely best in attempting to provide the comprehensive educational needs of these students in that it distributes responsibilities, utilizes existing manpower, and potentially enhances and improves the quality of the process. The public health nurse's expertise in family dynamics, human growth and development, understanding of handicapped conditions, knowledge of community resources, skill in the referral process, and experience in coordination of services should enable her to be a liason between the school, home and community.

Public Law 94-142 has broadened the traditional definition of education and the responsibilities of school systems in meeting special educational needs. Concurrently the role of the public health nurse in relation to the handicapped child has expanded from one of "caring for" the child to assisting in facilitating his learning.

With increasing emphasis on helping all children achieve their maximum potential, needs will be identified that will require expanded intervention by multidisciplines in developing programs to accomplish this goal. Richard E. Farson in his "Bill of Rights for 1984" sums up this never ending process with his statement "The most frustrating fact of life is this: the more progress we make, the more we must make, the more needs we satisfy, the more needs we develop".[3]

Notes

[1]Leahy, Kathleen M., Cobb, M. Marguerite, and Jones, Mary C. Community Health Nursing (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1977): 12.

[2]Freeman, Ruth B. Public Health Nursing Practice (Philadelphia and London: W. B. Saunders Company, 1963): 34.

[3]Farson, Richard E. "Bill of Rights for 1984," Dunston, Mary J. and Garlan, Patricia W. Worlds in the Making (New York: Printice Hall, Inc., 1970): 367.

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